

THE VOICE OF KURT VONNEGUT

©Nick Curry and Jeremy C. Ellis

May 29, 2009

First Annual Meeting of the [Kurt Vonnegut Society](#)

Boston, MA

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *Armageddon in Retrospect*, Mark Vonnegut paints a picture of his famous father that we had never seen before—or never bothered to look at. He talks about Vonnegut as a writer-craftsman, mumbling to himself, obsessing over details, and crumpling up mostly blank sheets when the sentence just won't work.

It's not that the shoe doesn't fit; we can picture Vonnegut doing all of these things. But this is not the Vonnegut that we know. This is not the Vonnegut who showed up at his lectures or on the pages of his novels and short stories and essays and so on. The Vonnegut we were familiar with was quick to laugh and slick as a whistle, though in a flying-by-the-seat-of-his-pants sort of way; he seemed disorganized, flustered even. But somehow the jokes were tight and the timing was just right. As anyone who has even thought about writing comedy knows, funny doesn't just happen. You work for it. Vonnegut himself described it as building a trap and then springing it at just the right moment.

In this essay, we will work toward describing the voice that Vonnegut used and its effect on his readers. From there we will consider a question that have puzzled some critics: Why would someone who saw himself as a serious writer choose to write in such a lowbrow and informal way?

PART ONE: ACTIVE READING

Listen:

This simple word was a frequent starting point for Vonnegut. It was the beginning of short stories, it opened chapters of *Bluebeard*, and in *Slaughterhouse Five*, it started the Tralfamadorian tale that has already begun. It is an invocation: *something is about to happen now*. It is an invitation: *be quiet, take note*. It is also a subtle way of reminding the reader that storytelling isn't always connected with the written word.

And Vonnegut's use of the word "Listen" as a beginning reminds us—right off the bat—of his own presence. He's there with me as I read, I *hear* him speaking, in what sounds very much like his own voice, spinning tales, seemingly out of thin air, just for me.

Reading, then, is somehow akin to listening for Vonnegut. He characterized the act of reading this way in *Like Shaking Hands with God*:

. . . literature is the only art that requires our audience to be performers. You have to be able to read and you have to be able to read awfully well. You have to read so well that you get irony! . . . It is extremely difficult. . . . Literature is idiosyncratic arrangements in horizontal lines of only twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten Arabic numbers, and about eight punctuation marks. And yet there are people like *you* who can look at a printed page and put on shows in your head. (LSHWG 17-18)

Reading, then, is active. It is purposeful and participatory. The reader must work pretty hard. And the reader must have certain types of knowledge both relatively simple—knowledge of the language in which the work is written—and relatively complex—knowledge of cultural references and literary allusions. From there, the reader must then suspend time and divorce her or himself from their life for a spell and engage not only their eyes—to read the words—but also

their mind—to imagine the scenarios. Add to this the task of staying alert in their reading so as to bring that knowledge—and of course their sense of humor—to bear on what they read.

Vonnegut’s own work demands this kind of participatory, or, what we will refer to as “active,” reading. This is evident in two of his characteristic formal qualities. First, Vonnegut is terse. He doesn’t say too much. He leaves room for the reader to see what they will. Chapters—whole novels—are brief, and he often changes the subject, sometimes entirely for the sake of humor, almost as if you and he are engaged in dynamic conversation.

Second, Vonnegut’s works are, as he says in “Chapter One” of *Slaughterhouse Five*, “jumbled and jangled.” He doesn’t move neatly from front to back or beginning to end. Instead, he plays with our standard ways of perceiving the world. Instead of dealing with time as we humans perceive it—one second melding into the next, flowing irrevocably from the past into the future—Vonnegut gives us a new way of thinking about time, the Tralfamadorian way. And instead of writing the book that Mary O’Hare feared that he would (an American Army populated by characters that could be played by Duke Wayne, rather than the “babies” who actually fought the war), Vonnegut gives us a version of World War II that draws the reader’s attention to the youth of the soldiers, that makes the reader wonder who really is good and who is evil, or if those distinctions really mean anything. Vonnegut upsets structures that we tend to take for granted, and in doing so, invites us to consider other ways of seeing the world.

A novel written with this goal is naturally somewhat jumbled, a trait present in much of Vonnegut’s work that has been mistaken for hackery or a lack of seriousness. Mark Vonnegut, however, dismisses this line of criticism, making the case that his father was a deliberate writer in his introduction to *Armageddon in Retrospect*:

He wanted to get things right. . . . He rewrote and rewrote and rewrote, muttering whatever he had just written over and over. . . . [T]hen he would pause, thoughtfully rip

the barely written-on sheet of typing paper from the typewriter, crumple it up, throw it away, and start over again.

And this portrait of the writer rings true. After all, Vonnegut makes the jokes work, and, as Mark Vonnegut says later in the same piece, “[a]nyone who thinks that Vonnegut’s jokes or essays came easily or were written off the cuff hasn’t tried to write.”

PART TWO: JOKES

Kurt Vonnegut’s style, ultimately, is a kind of structured disorder. He goes to great lengths to make the reader feel as though the work was written off the cuff, even though it wasn’t. Joking is another form of communication that works in similar ways. Just as reading is an activity that depends upon reader and writer alike, the teller of a joke relies on the active participation of the hearer. And jokes are terse, allowing the hearer of the joke to use his or her imagination.

Finally, jokes seem to be funniest when they are (or seem to be) spontaneous.

Because Vonnegut’s work shares these qualities with jokes, the philosopher Ted Cohen’s aptly titled book *Jokes* can illuminate this discussion. In that book, Cohen explores the importance of jokes in our lives, and the word that he uses again and again to describe what it is like to share jokes is *intimacy*. He describes the process as a “transaction” between joker and audience that has the effect of bringing the two closer together.

Terseness—or in Polonius’s word, “brevity”—is a common trait of jokes, but it is a necessary condition of a joke or simply a byproduct of the joke itself? Ted Cohen answers this question quite nicely:

It may be that jokes are most appreciated when they are brisk and not weighed down, but I think it is a mistake to think that it is the concision itself that matters. What matters is

what makes the concision possible. What makes it possible is that so much can go unsaid. And why can it go unsaid? *Because the audience already knows it.* (Jokes, 25)

Just as literature is an art form that requires a significant contribution from the audience, jokes, too, rely on certain shared knowledge. All of this shared knowledge begins to form a trust between the author and the reader; a trust that becomes a form of intimacy.

And it is that intimacy, according to Cohen, that makes joking so rewarding. He says, “It is a general thesis of mine that a deep satisfaction in successful joke transactions is the sense held mutually by teller and hearer that they are joined in feeling,” (25). Jokes, then, are mutual efforts. The teller must work to create the joke and to deliver it just so. The listener must pay close attention to all of the details laid out by the teller and call upon all sorts of knowledge as they attempt to get the joke. And the transaction is mutually beneficial. Joke tellers carefully deliver the setup and the punch line, watching closely to see if they’ve hooked their audience, pleased if they make someone else laugh. Joke hearers listen carefully, picking out the important details and listening carefully for the twist, and they laugh, not only with the joy hearing a funny joke, but also with delight that they got the joke.

PART THREE: INTIMACY

Just as a sense of intimacy develops between the tellers and hearers of jokes, Kurt Vonnegut sees his readers as collaborators, themselves an essential part of his works, and he deliberately works to establish a deep connection with his readers. Vonnegut’s “jumbled and jangled” style is a formal choice that is both appropriate to the subject matter at hand (it wouldn’t make sense to write a novel about Tralfamadorian time that is itself chronological) and develops that sense of intimacy with the reader.

One benefit of Vonnegut's polished yet simple style is his ability to say and illustrate meaningful things without getting caught up in overly pretentious, intimidating language.

Vonnegut prefers to get to the point. He stated as much in numerous places, most notably in his introduction to a collection of his short stories, *Bagombo Snuff Box*, in which—among other things—he gives those readers who want to improve their writing a numbered list of his best advice, excerpted here:

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted. . . .
4. Every sentence must do one of two things—reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible. . . .
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible.

Rather than waxing on intellectually about this or that, Vonnegut instead chose to use plain language. His writing is full of the kind of words that regular people—the majority of the population—use frequently. This use of everyday language allowed Vonnegut to not only appeal to a much larger audience than a lot of his contemporaries (an audience often ignored by serious writers), but also to earn their trust more quickly. This trust leads to a special kind of intimacy, an intimacy where you can actually imagine, without effort, Vonnegut there in the room with you. You can see the cigarette smoke hanging in the air around him, hear his guttural voice, listen to his hoarse laughter. To quote Mark Vonnegut's introduction once again: “[He] connected with people on a visceral level.”

He goes on to talk about how his father was able to get away with saying very “outrageous and true” things because moments before he was “talking about celibacy and twerps and snarfs.” This intimacy is the key to understanding why Vonnegut wrote the way he wrote. Vonnegut himself spoke many times about growing up in a fairly large family and how he used

humor to get the attention of his relatives. He perfected this skill-set as he grew older, trying out different methods of delivery and style. When he began to write and cater his humor to a larger audience he brought the same tools to his typewriter.

However, this level of intimacy with the reader is not only the key, it is also the reason itself that his writing was so personal. Vonnegut often gave the advice to “write to please just one person.” His one person was his sister, Alice, who he admired greatly. Together, the two of them thought a lot about how jokes worked and he continually credited her for helping him explore what was funny. They were very close and it is only logical that his writing would be so personal, intimate, and full of the kind of crass humor that the two of them enjoyed, because he was writing to make his sister laugh—to cause her pleasure.

All of this knee-slapping and defense-dropping creates that sense of trust we referenced earlier, and like Mark Vonnegut stated, it allowed Vonnegut to get away with a lot. As a reader, we are lured into a place of comfort and ease, but Vonnegut doesn’t let it go there. If he did, perhaps an argument could be made that he was a hack after all. However, this pretense of buffoonery is preparing us for something that has been on his mind.

Over the course of his work, he lays a number of observations onto the page. These ideas are not small or insignificant. They include a restructuring of the Western family units, the way money is distributed, how we treat one another, and on and on. These topics are generally not lighter fare, but through this use of a “low-brow” form he is able to say things very simply and to the point. This opens the doors of conversation across a larger demographic than the work of more traditional authors with similar goals

CONCLUSION

Vonnegut took his writing very seriously. This seems to be a fact that a lot of his critics have overlooked when considering his work. As a result, we think that he was unfairly treated by readers who failed to see anything but a vulgar joke. These readers then shut their books, rather than opening their minds. This was a choice—a gamble—that Vonnegut not only made, but felt necessary to take in his quest to consider and report the truth about us, our culture, and our world.

His style might occasionally be rude, he might say something that is difficult to swallow, or he might not take a topic as seriously as you'd like him to, but he was consistently attempting—and in our opinion, with a high rate of success—to break down the boundaries between the writer and her or his audience. This connection between the writer, the reader, and her or his world is the direct result of this approach, and we argue that they are virtually unattainable—on a similar scale—without his sensibilities. Lastly, we state that his tone and methods are the reason that his writings are still relevant and readable today, regardless of what the literary purists, the PTA, and possibly your own mother says.